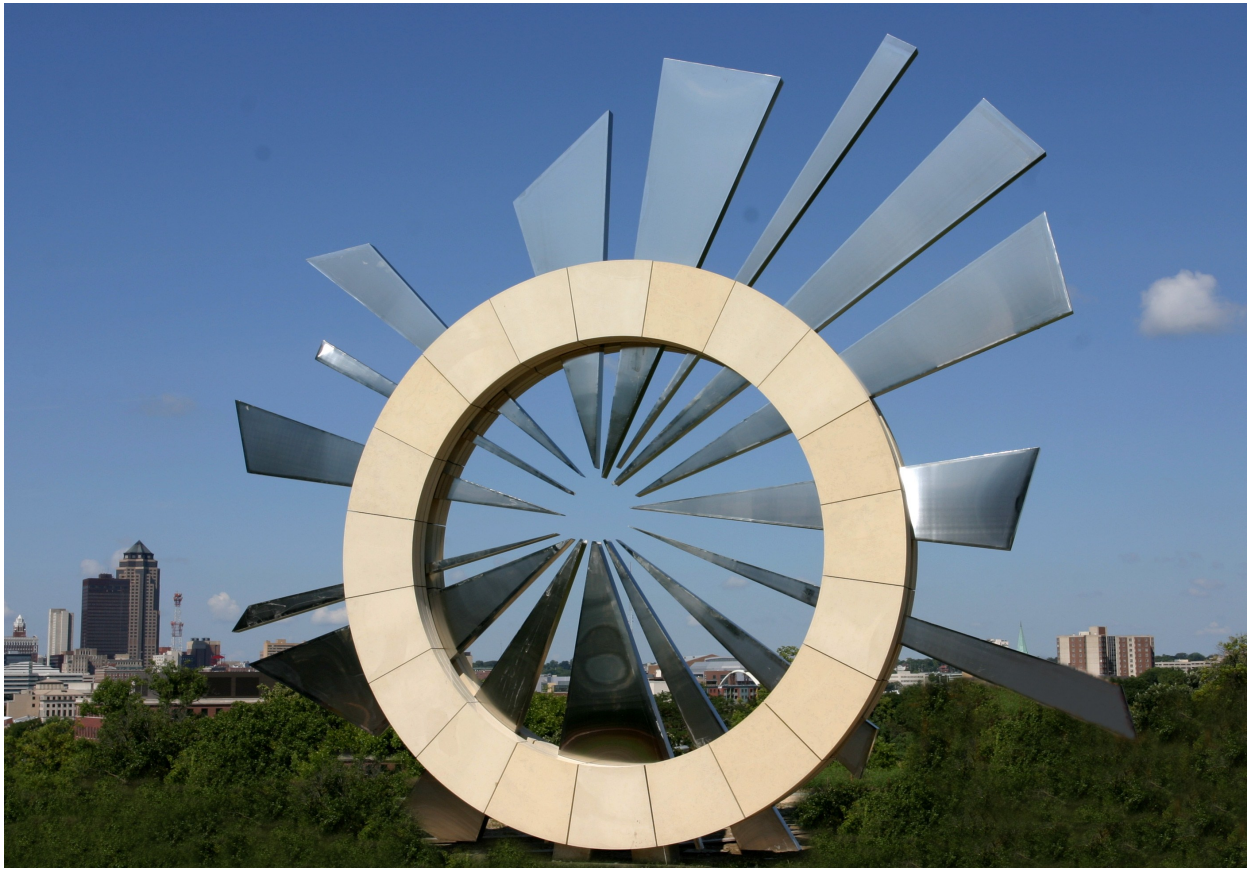


# Shattering Silence



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Ralph was a slave in Missouri, owned by a man named Montgomery. In 1834, Ralph entered into a written agreement with Montgomery to earn his freedom. The agreement allowed Ralph to live in the Iowa territory to earn money to buy his freedom for \$550 plus interest. Ralph hoped to earn the money by working in the lead mines near Dubuque. However, after five years he couldn't earn enough money to make the payments.

Two bounty hunters heard about Ralph and offered to seize and return him to Montgomery for \$100. Calling him a fugitive from justice, they secured a court order to have the sheriff seize him. They intended to take him by a steamboat back to Missouri. But an Iowa farmer named Alexander Butterworth—described by a judge as a "noble-hearted Irishman"—learned of the action and went to the judge, Thomas Wilson.

Judge Wilson stopped the men from returning Ralph to Missouri and suggested the matter should be heard by the Supreme Court of the Territory. Iowa's high court justices heard the case, and on July 4, 1839, they ruled in Ralph's favor. In their ruling the justices stated that Ralph should pay his debt, but contended that "no man in this territory can be reduced to slavery." The justices said because Montgomery allowed Ralph to leave Missouri, and live in a free territory, Montgomery lost his right over him in the Iowa territory.

In their opinion, the justices wrote, "When, in seeking to accomplish his object, (the claimant) illegally restrains a human being of his liberty, it is proper that the laws, which should extend equal protection to men of all colors and conditions, should intervene."

The unanimous ruling established the tradition in Iowa's courts of ensuring the rights and liberties of all the people of the state. Years later, the Legislature adopted Iowa's motto—"Our liberties we prize and our rights we will maintain"—which stands as a permanent reminder that the freedoms in this state are freedoms for all.